

Snatched off a
Tehran street,
Matt Trevithick
was arrested,
blindfolded,
and locked in a
solitary cell in
Iran's most
brutal prison.

41

DAYS



"You have this overpowering feeling that you're stuck in a stupid system. Everybody is just doing their job."

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JANICE CHECCHIO

✕ 41 DAYS ✕

As told to Caleb Daniloff

THE LAST TIME we met Matthew Trevithick, he was helping launch a successful national rowing program in war-ravaged Afghanistan in 2013. Since then, the former BU oarsman has ghostwritten a memoir for the first post-Taliban minister of higher education in Afghanistan, reported from one of the deadliest patches of Taliban country for the *Daily Beast*, survived a terrorist attack on his hotel while traveling in Mali, settled in Turkey, and cofounded SREO, an independent humanitarian outfit devoted to the Syrian refugee crisis. Trevithick's US passport, a kaleidoscopic narrative of exotic stamps and visas, is so worn that the cover emblem has rubbed off. Still, it was a shock to friends and acquaintances when the media last January named him as one of five American prisoners (including *Washington Post* reporter Jason Rezaian) released from Iran's Evin Prison, a notorious facility with a brutal reputation. Only a handful of people even knew Trevithick (CGS'06, CAS'08) had been detained.

The 30-year-old Massachusetts native had been studying Farsi at Tehran University in fall 2015. After five years of applying, he'd finally received a government invitation. "I was ecstatic," Trevithick recalls. "I'd get to spend three months in this country that's such a mystery and an anathema. I wasn't supernervous about my safety. I pegged the chances of something happening, some kind of odd behavior from the authorities, at 10 percent."

As October slipped into November, the political atmosphere in Tehran prompted Trevithick to reevaluate his calculus. The United States and Iran had reached a landmark nuclear agreement a few months earlier, but as February elections loomed, hard-line Iranian politicians, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, began airing their displeasure, denouncing America at increasingly hostile volumes. The surveillance of Westerners became more blatant. Trevithick had even been summoned for questioning. After consulting with his family back home, he decided it was time to pack things up.

The next morning, he left his dorm to purchase an airline ticket.

Monday, December 7, 2015

Daneshjou Boulevard

Tehran, Iran

9:01 a.m.

DAY 1

It's cloudy, but in a beautiful way. It's the first snow of the year. I make a snowball and throw it into the road and head for the taxi stand. As I walk by a white Hyundai Sonata, three guys jump out and ask, "Are you Matthew?" When I answer, I'm pushed into the backseat.

This religious music is playing in the car, a rhythmic chant: "Hussein! Hussein! Hussein! Hussein!" I'm trying to remain calm. We're driving down this snaking hill. I don't know that we are heading to Evin Prison. It just becomes clear as the other possibilities dwindle. I'm doing simple comparison checks from previous experiences: *I'm alive, not being shot at, nobody's cutting off my hands*. I'm going to take each moment in very small doses. There's clearly been a mistake. You have to hope that

the Iranians realize it's not in their self-interest to start an international incident. They can go through all my things. I have nothing to hide. I was vetted a thousand times for my visa.

We drive through the gate of the prison and into a metal hangar. One of the men says, "Put your forehead against the headrest." Then they blindfold me with a big gray cloth. One guy, very casually, asks in Farsi, "Are you scared?" I say, "Yeah, I'm little nervous. What's going on?" He doesn't say anything.

Then they take me into a small, cold room. They take away my clothes, except my underwear and undershirt. That's when I realize this isn't just a misunderstanding. I'm being processed into prison. I sit down in a chair, sign my name, get fingerprinted and photographed. I'm given light blue pants with an elastic band, a long-sleeve button-down, and sandals. The sandals are dirty, worn down. The blindfold goes back on.

From there, I'm steered upstairs to a cell on the second floor. I'm in solitary. I can touch three walls at any given time.

The ceiling is about 12 feet high. I'm given a wool blanket, a towel, a toothbrush, and toothpaste. The interrogations start right away. I'm led to a room where I'm made to sit in a chair facing the wall. They don't want me to see their faces. I'm talking to the wall, and they're listening behind me. I hear prayer beads clicking in their hands and smell their cologne. The first question is, "Do you know who Jason Rezaian is?" I say, "Of course, the whole world knows that name." "Well, he's never getting out of here and neither are you." I'm accused of personally trying to overthrow the government. Of having access to bank accounts with millions of dollars and weapons caches.

There is no bed in my cell, just a thin fabric covering the cement floor. I use my towel for a pillow. The door has a rectangle opening with two bars, just big enough for someone's face. You can't see much through it, just cold fluorescent lights going down the hallway. Breakfast is a packet of honey, a frozen pat of butter you have to crumble with a spoon, or bread.

DAY 3

They take me to the open-air room at the end of the cellblock. They force me to call my mom and say I'm going to the mountains, that I'll be out of cell service. They don't want this getting out. It's cold, it's nighttime. I can see the sky through a plastic sheet. It's the only place they can get reception. My mom and I had a system of texting every day, just to say hi. It has been three days, so when I tell her I'm going on vacation, she knows right away.

DAY 4

I'm allowed to go to the bathroom five times a day. I push a button. They come open the door. The bathroom doesn't have a heating vent, so it's cold. There's an open grated window at the top, no seal on it. I go a couple of times just to breathe outside air, but it's in this putrid, stinking room. It's not a Western toilet. It's a hole in the ground. But if I stand at a particular spot, I can catch a draft of clean, pure mountain air. The walls are degraded just enough that you can make marks. Everyone has left notes to each other: *You can get through this. Don't give up.* I scratch my name: *Matt.*

DAY 5

There's a heating grate in my cell that becomes my salvation. It comes out from the wall just enough so I can get my big toes under and do sit-ups. I turn every day into a really long workout session. Two sets before breakfast, four sets before lunch, and eight sets after lunch to get me to dinner. By the end of my time in solitary, I'm doing over 1,000 sit-ups and 400 push-ups a day.

DAY 7

You have this overpowering feeling that you're stuck in a stupid system. Everybody is just doing their job. I ask the food guy, "How long do people usually stay here?" And he essentially says, "The system's working, relax, sit tight. You're going to be outta here. Just process through." One of the guys asks me

all kinds of questions about America. Being able to speak Farsi is huge. I can ask for an extra tea. Usually, we get two or three pieces of bread and I ask for six, because I need more food. I'm six-foot-four, not five-foot-two like my interrogators. I lose 13 pounds while I'm in there.

DAY 8

I spend the entire day watching the sun move across the wall of my cell. I count out 10-minute blocks and make a notch in the wall where the sun has passed, so I can tell what time it is. It's fun the first time and then it gets really trying.

DAY 10

They tell me somebody very important, a minister, is going to review my case. At 2 or 3 o'clock, I'm taken from my cell and pushed across the street to get my regular clothes. Then I'm shoved into a car, blindfold still on, as we drive out of the prison. Two of the guys are the same ones who arrested me. We leave the gates, and we're stuck in traffic immediately. It takes us 40 minutes to drive the half-mile. At one point, we're next to an Italian gelato truck, and they're all joking about whether it's real just because it says 100-percent imported gelato. Most "genuine" Western products in Iran are fakes imported from China. They ask my opinion.

We finally arrive at this five-star ho-

tel. They tell me to relax. I'm walked past at least a dozen European businessmen and -women in the lobby. I look in their eyes. *Please remember this face.* We take the elevator to the 13th floor. I ask permission to use the bathroom. It's the first time I see myself in the mirror. I don't like what I see: unkempt, hair too long, beard too long. I look tired.

When I get back, the guards are flipping through the TV channels and they stop on *Titanic*, the scene where the boat is going down. I'm watching Leo run through the ship trying to avoid water. It's a total metaphor for my life at that moment. I feel like I'm sinking.

Finally, this fat guy is introduced to me as a friend of the president and a minister. This could have easily been one of their buddies. The guards are like, "Matt, he's a very busy man, an important man. Just tell the truth and we'll let you go," and I swear he's off to the side on his phone playing *Candy Crush*. It's almost like I'm supposed to understand what's happening and roll with it. They have a video camera on me the whole time. The objective is always to get me on national television to admit I was there to overthrow the government. I keep calmly saying, "My name is Matt Trevithick. I'm a student from America here at the invitation of the Iranian government."

This lasts several hours. The so-called minister finally says, "We'll determine your situation in a few days." All these vague statements are killing me. The three guys drive me back. It's late. The car is really cold. It's back to the routine.



Matt Trevithick in October 2015, at Naqsh-e Jahan, in Isfahan, Iran. Parts of the historic square, a center of religious worship, political power, and commerce, date to 1598.

DAY 12

The bad cop shows up. Any statements I wrote, he says, "Write it again." He hands me sheets with names on it, random people from my emails, and says, "Write everything you know about this person." Nothing I write about anyone is anything you can't find on Google. He is really cold. "I don't believe you. I don't have time for your lies. I need to know more. You haven't been doing enough to tell us the truth. You're going to be here a while."

DAY 16

In the afternoon, I hear a guy try to kill himself. Through the heating grate, I can hear somebody in pain. Loud, pained breathing. Then all the guards come running to his cell, screaming, "Oh my God, what are you doing? Is he OK? Get the doctor!" He tried to hang himself with his shirt.

I hope he's all right and I think how bad must it have been for him to go through that. But it makes sense to me—that's the weirdest part. I feel a sense of solidarity. He's taking control of his life. That is his decision. He doesn't want to die. I meet him later in a group cell. He has a kid and wife, but it's a logical act for someone in his situation who's at the end of his rope, literally. If this is what's necessary for him, I hope it happens as best as something like this can happen, and if he decides to live, that he gets through living. Whatever he wants, I just want it for him.

DAY 20

They shave my head, which really militarizes me. *All right, that's it. No more hope, no more nothing. I'm going to totally attack this.* It's a very odd experience having your head shaved under duress in a foreign country. The barber is having a totally normal conversation with me. "What do you do in Tehran?" "I'm a student." "Which university?" "Tehran University." "Oh wow, that's our best university. What do you do there?" "Study Farsi." "Your Farsi is pretty good."

Later, during my interrogation, I ask, "How long am I going to be here? It's

STATE SECURITY

When Matt Trevithick was freed from an Iranian prison along with four other Americans on January 16, 2016, pundits speculated that the release was part of the landmark agreement on Iran's nuclear program, a straight-up prisoner swap (the United States released seven Iranians), or as suggested by a *New York Times* editorial, a "conciliatory gesture" by Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, signaling a new chapter in US-Iranian relations. All three explanations are far more credible than any justification for their arrest. Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian human rights lawyer, writes in the *Washington Post* that the Iranian government routinely arrests its own citizens for such alleged crimes as "propaganda against the state" or "endangering the security of the state," but in reality they are being held for their political beliefs, their human rights work, or their journalism. In Trevithick's case, no formal charges were ever filed.

been 20 days already." The bad cop says, "Twenty days is nothing, Matt. We've been very good to you so far, very nice." There's always the threat of worse. The smashed tiles underneath my chair, the dried blood on the wall. You think about all the people who have been arrested and interrogated here. You can't help but think about the flow of people through this facility. This whole place is so worn.

DAY 24

Time plus uncertainty is starting to take its toll. *Is this ever going to end? Am I ever going to get out of here?* It hurts in this deep, agonizing way. I'm concerned about everything starting to blur—time, the days, me. So I do a thought exercise. I decide to recall, as accurately as possible, my entire life, starting with my very first memory: what was it, describe it, think about it, live in it. I work my way through high school. I was in two rock bands. I go through our entire song catalog.

DAY 26

Somebody who says he's a lawyer or a judge comes to my cell and asks if everything is OK. It's surreal. I actually laugh. I mean I'm sitting in a little six-by-seven room, where I'm entirely alone, sleeping on the floor.

DAY 28

They finally let me speak with my mother again. I ask her to recite Psalm 23. Even if you're an atheist, there's a lot of poetry and beautiful imagery in terms of being calm and relaxed and that you're not alone. Like all honest people, I struggle with faith. I was raised where we went to church on Sundays. This is a trying time and there are only so many sources I can draw strength from, and religion is one of them. To have your mother do something like that for you is incredibly soothing. If there's a time when I'm closest to tears, it's then.

DAY 29

In the evening, I'm moved out of solitary and into a larger cell with two roommates. I'm ecstatic. I always felt I could get through this if I had someone to share the experience with. Farhad (not his real name) is a 40-year-old computer hacker. He's been in solitary for 13 months. I can't even imagine. He's the one who tried to hang himself. Ali is this 75-year-old guy who is just so crusty and crunchy. Picture a really salty journalist. He wears glasses, but can't see. He always forgets where his blindfold is—usually in his pocket. I realize I'm in this prison with a lot of interesting people. Intellectuals, political dissidents, artists, foreign businessmen, it seems anyone who's doing anything compelling with their lives is in here.

DAY 31

For the first time I meet the Swiss diplomats, which is fantastic. Since the United States doesn't have diplomatic relations, the Swiss act on our behalf. They indicate to one of my interrogators that there are rules, that you can't just pick up someone for no reason, that

they're in violation of international laws their own theocracy has signed. The meeting is over as soon as it begins. On their way out, the Swiss give me a Toblerone bar and oranges, which never make it to my cell. The guards eat them.

DAY 33

They want Farhad, Ali, and me to shave our beards. We're out in the open-air room. There's a little mirror that's been hung and a chair in the corner. We're taking a hard look at ourselves. We take off our shirts because we don't want to get hair everywhere. The guard on duty is relaxed. And this 75-year-old half-blind man is trying to touch up our haircuts and taking off way too much hair. It's completely hilarious. This just makes my day.

After, the guard lets the three of us walk around in the main open-air area. That's where Farhad recites a poem to me in full by a poet named Parvin E'tesami about how "the police came for me and then they took my friend," echoing that famous Jewish poem: "They came for gypsies, but I wasn't a gypsy, so I didn't say anything..." Farhad, the computer hacker who tried to hang himself a few weeks earlier, is now reciting poetry to me. It's surreal.

DAY 34

We lose Farhad. He is moved out. It hits Ali and me really hard. I have no idea what happens to him.

DAY 37

I lose Ali. Back alone. It's really tough without them. Our conversations were funny and sarcastic.

That night, I hear a woman have a total breakdown in Russian.

DAY 38

I get a new roommate. An ultrareligious guy. He ignores me. He's making deals with God, starts fasting even though it's not Ramadan. He doesn't know why he's in there. They all just roll with it. *The system's working. Don't get upset. Have faith. You'll be out of here eventually.*

DAY 40

I go to the bathroom and through the window see the moon for the first time. Waxing gibbous.

Later, I'm convinced I hear another American. The guards are pushing a guy past my cell saying, "You go here." The only way they would use English is for a foreigner. And the man says, "OK," in perfect American English.

DAY 41

I wake up just before the first call to prayer. The guards take me to a nearby building to see a man they say is a judge. Like many Iranians I cross paths with in Evin, the so-called judge is barely five feet tall. His fleshy chin wobbles as he points his finger up in the air and weaves a comically ill-informed tale of American involvement in the region, hitting all the usual stale points.

He writes on a blank piece of paper for a long time and says, "Sign here," pointing sternly with a chubby finger adorned with the appropriate pieces of stone indicating devoutness. I sign it, having no choice. I ask what it is. After a long lecture about the evils of America and the horrible treatment of Iranian prisoners in America, he says in English, "Bye-bye form." I don't know what this means and am nervous things are about to get worse.

Back to my cell. I'm alone. My roommate is out for questioning. I work to stay calm. I focus on what I can control and work to ignore the rest of it, to ignore the question: "What if they..."

Not a half hour passes before another guard brings me back out to the hallway and seats me in a chair. Other prisoners are walking by. My first interrogator shows up, saying the "minister" wants to meet again to review my story. I say nothing. He grabs me and pushes me down a few flights of stairs. There are two doors, soundproofed.

The room is pitch-black except for a single light on a chair. There is a video camera. The director wears a breathing mask for reasons I don't understand. It looks like they are set up to film a murder. They sit me in a green chair with faux leather and turn on the camera. My second interrogator stands behind a white blanket that is hung from the

ceiling. They seem hurried, demanding I tell the truth. They threaten me with everything. I refuse to talk. I surprise even myself with my firmness. "I've said everything I have to say." I can hear the doubt in me, but I push ahead, my conviction building. If everything has been taken from you and you accept it, the resulting freedom is very powerful. I even give the camera the finger while I can tell it is focusing on my face.

"You never apologized for what you did to Iran." I stare at the floor. Then I stand up, something I've never done, and repeat, "I've said everything I have to say." I turn my back to them. They drag me outside and throw me up against the wall, tell me I'm never going to be released, that everything until now has been for children. I feel myself move into the third person, watching from outside, almost curious to see what they'll do. I go back and forth between deep fear and existential nonchalance. If nothing has any value, I don't have much to worry about.

Then I'm taken to a doctor, who checks my vitals and says, "Azadi, Inshallah." I ask him to say it again, not understanding. "Freedom, God willing." In my cell 20 minutes later, I'm told, "Collect all your things." I'm walked to the end of the hallway. If we turn right, I'm going back into solitary. These are extremely stressful steps. I'm very aware of my breathing. The guy grabs me, then pulls me left. We go downstairs, and he's practically pushing me out the door.

In a building across the street, I'm given my belongings and my passport. I'm driven to the gate. When the blindfold comes off, I see a man in a suit and pink tie. The Swiss diplomat. He motions for me to get in the armored Land Cruiser. We race to the airport. I call my mother.

After missing my first flight because officials take six hours to go through my paperwork, I'm told I've overstayed my visa and need to pay a fee. I hold up my right index finger, which still has an ink stamp. "Evin," I say. The official smiles and says, "You still have to pay."

After an overnight stop in Istanbul, I land at Logan. I'm starving. My family and I go straight to U Burger in Kenmore Square. I used to go there all the time as a student. As I'm ordering, the manager says, "Hey, Matt. I haven't seen you in a while. What have you been up to?"